

Lever Park

During the year 1898, Mr. J. W. Crompton of Rivington Hall decided to sell Rivington Hall and Estate and it was generally expected that Liverpool Corporation would be the purchaser. The position was watched very keenly by Mr. W. H. Lever, a very successful soap manufacturer, who was on the look-out for a site for a residence. This had to be in a healthy position, within easy reach of Bolton, his native town, and not too far from Port Sunlight, his business place near Birkenhead in Cheshire. To the surprise of everyone concerned, Liverpool Corporation made it known that they were not interested in purchasing the property. This cleared the way for Mr. Lever who had refrained from making an offer as he did not wish to be driven into bidding against such a powerful and wealthy corporation. So after a short period of negotiation he obtained the Rivington Hall Estate the purchase was completed in January, 1900. At this point it is fair to mention the sale did not include the Manorial title, this was a land sale, Lord Leverhulme was a Lord in his own right. The old family bloodline retained their share of the Manorial title as 'Incorporeal property'. On donating the estate to Bolton Lord Leverhulme donated land for use as a park. There has never been any evidence to show otherwise. Lord Leverhulme is one of the most well respected figures in local history, he saved Rivington for us to enjoy today. The old families are forever thankful to him and his family for this.

The career of William Hesketh Lever, 1851-1925, first Viscount Leverhulme, is too well known for us to dwell on it at any great length or in any intricate detail, so we will content ourselves with writing a short account suitable for our subject in hand. He was not born a poor child. His father, who attended Rivington School in 1820, was a successful wholesale grocer in Bolton who left a fortune of 58,000 when he died in 1897. The future viscount worked in his father's business until the year 1884, when he founded a business of his own in Warrington. He manufactured soap, based on a formula generally used in the trade at that time, and made it as good as it was possible; but this did not satisfy him. He wanted to make it better, a lot better. He wanted to produce a soap that he could truthfully advertise as the best and purest in the world. This ambition led to the engagement of a clever young industrial chemist, Mr. William Hough Watson, from Lever's home town, Bolton. A new formula was evolved after much experiment. Its greatest improvement on the original one was the use of vegetable oil in place of tallow. The resultant soap was superior in every respect to all other soaps then on the market. It was named Sunlight and the formula was patented. A huge nation wide advertising campaign was undertaken and, helped by numerous original ideas, success was immediate and prolonged and the strong foundations of what is now the great Unilever organisation were well and truly laid. It is well known that Mr. Lever, as he then was, made a huge personal fortune and we are pleased to relate that the young Bolton chemist also did very well. He retired to Braystones House near Beckermeth on the Cumberland coast, where he lived the comfortable life of a country squire until the thirties of this century, when he died and was buried in St. Bridget's churchyard, Beckermeth, Cumberland.

During the year 1899, Mr. W. H. Lever negotiated the purchase of Hall i' th' Wood, Bolton, which he then presented to the Borough of Bolton and he bore the cost of equipping it as a folk museum. This was the first of a great number of benefactions he made in Bolton and the surrounding districts. He was a governor of Bolton Grammar School and it was largely through his generosity that in 1899 a move was made from the original site near the Parish Church to Westbourne, a large house on Chorley New Road, and, as the opportunity arose, he purchased neighbouring houses for the use of the now expanding and prosperous school.

Also by his efforts the Bolton Grammar School and the Bolton High School for Girls were placed upon one and the same foundation, and by a Trust Deed dated September 18th, 1913, Sir W. H. Lever Bart., as he had now become, settled a capital sum of money on the joint foundation to produce an income of per annum. The first five years' income had to be set apart for the erection of new buildings, but the construction was held up by the 1914-18 war and was not commenced until 1924.

A site for the residence that Mr. Lever desired was chosen on the ridge above Hall Wood in Rivington, about one third of a mile North-West of the top of Rivington Pike, and a large wooden bungalow was built here which was named Roynton Cottage, Roynton being one of the old forms of the name Rivington. Four lodges, a large workshop and garage, a pigeon tower and stables were built and landscape gardens were laid out surrounding the site. An independent water supply was obtained from a spring on Winter Hill and work was commenced on roads from Horwich Moorgate, Rivington Lane, and Belmont. This work in Rivington began in 1901 and in January of that year Mr. Lever, as owner of Rivington Hall estate, had invited his Rivington and Horwich tenantry, to the number of eighty, to a dinner and entertainment at the Black-a-Moor's Head Hotel, Rivington. It was a huge success. Later that same year this amazing man wrote the following letter to Mr. F. W. Thompson, his agent in the Bolton district: Thornton Manor, Thornton Hough, Cheshire. 6th September, 1901.

Dear Sir,

I shall be obliged if you will communicate to the Mayor of Bolton, on my behalf, an offer to give the town of Bolton a portion of the lands in the Parish of Rivington belonging to myself, which are enclosed within the under mentioned boundaries, and more clearly shown on accompanying plan, to be used as a public park for the use and enjoyment of the public for ever, but subject to the understanding that during my lifetime I may, provided that same may be done at my sole expense, erect on such land any building or buildings for the use of the public, or make any roads or footpaths thereon, for the proper opening up of the land for the use of the public and generally deal with the land as may appear to me to be desirable for the purpose for which the park is intended viz. : The free and uninterrupted enjoyment by the public. Any work carried out by me in this way may, however, if desired, be removed after my decease. Boundaries : A line drawn from the Black Lad in Rivington to Sheep House Farm, down Hall Lane, up the north side of Hall Wood to Old Kates, following the south-east side of Hall Wood to the contour line 600 feet above sea level, as shown on the Ordnance Map, following approximately by the 600 foot contour line to the Douglas Brook in Shaw's Clough, and then following the Douglas brook until the same reaches the Rivington Reservoir. Within these boundaries there are other properties which do not belong to myself and which of course, are not included with the lands I am preparing to give. I also offer on the same conditions Rivington Pike within the following boundaries. On the north and north-east sides within the contour line 1,125 feet above sea level, and also sufficient land along the line of the two paths leading from the highroad to the Pike, and measuring from the centre of such footpaths 60 feet from each side to make each of these approaches 120 feet wide. It will necessarily take some time before the land can be dedicated to the use of the public and in bringing this about I particularly wish that every consideration be given to the farmers and others who are tenants upon the estate, and that every reasonable care be taken to cause them the minimum of inconvenience. If the town of Bolton is pleased to accept this offer I shall be obliged if you will take the necessary steps to have the property transferred so that the matter be completed on my return home in December next.

Yours faithfully, W. H. LEVER. J

J. Simpson, Esq., F. W. Thompson, Esq. Messrs. Hulton, Son and Harwood, Bolton.

News of the necessary steps being taken for the transfer of the land concerned brought a curious sequel from the Corporation of Liverpool. Rather belatedly they tried to force by an Act of Parliament, the acquisition of all the Rivington watershed which they had declared was of no interest to them three years before. In November 1901, Liverpool Corporation gave notice of application to Parliament for a bill to acquire the Parish of Rivington, including the Church, the Vicarage, the Grammar School, the Chapel, and the Manse, for the protection of their Rivington water supply.

At a meeting of the General Purposes Committee of the Bolton Corporation, held on Monday, 2nd of December 1901, Mr. Lever's intention of presenting a park in Rivington to Bolton was reported and his letter of the 6th of September to his agent, Mr. F. W. Thompson, was read. The gentlemen whose names are attached to it attended before the committee and Mr. Thompson produced a map of the estate which he had prepared. It was then resolved : That this Corporation gratefully accepts the very handsome and generous offer of Mr. W. H. Lever, now read, and refers the carrying out of the matters to the following sub-committee : The Mayor, the Deputy Mayor, Aldermen Brookes and Tonge, and Councillors Brown, W. Cooper, Fielding, Haslam, Hesketh, Thompson and Walmsley.

When the application of the Liverpool Corporation for a bill, which among other matters sought to acquire certain lands for the protection of their Rivington water supply, came before the House of Commons, an objection was raised by the Bolton Corporation and by the inhabitants of the village of Rivington. Bolton wanted to safeguard the Park and the villagers claimed that the Church, Vicarage, Grammar School, Chapel and Manse be excluded from the purchase.

A committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Bill, of the House of Commons, was formed to examine the position and to report back. The committee reported to the House of Commons on Thursday morning, 15th May 1902, that: "They recognised that the protection of the water supply was of primary importance, but they did not want to prejudice the generous proposal of Mr. Lever to present 400 acres as a park to Bolton and the surrounding towns. Therefore, whilst they found the preamble proved, which meant that the land became vested in the Corporation of Liverpool, they required that corporation to maintain it as a park to Bolton. As it was a free gift from Mr. Lever, the Corporation were not to pay for it, but they must maintain it. Mr. Lever was to retain his bungalow and sufficient land in its vicinity and the committee suggested that the park be named Lever Park.

Rivington Church, Vicarage, Grammar School, Chapel, and Manse were also excluded from the purchase by a clause in the Bill." Mr. Lever's other estate on the watershed was scheduled, along with other land, for compulsory purchase. Liverpool Corporation offered 40,000. for Mr. Lever's estate, but Mr. Lever fixed a prohibitive price of Arbitration followed and the award announced was that Liverpool Corporation have to pay to Mr. Lever the sum of together with the costs of the ward which are estimated at The arbitrators were Mr. Robert Vigers, F.S.I, and Mr. Edward Boyle K.C., and Mr. C. E. Middleton, M.Inst.C.E. acted as umpire. Mr. Lever's council were Mr. H. H. Asquith, K.C.,

M.P., Mr. Horridge, K.C., and Mr. F. M. Preston, and Liverpool Corporation's council were Mr. Balfour Browne, K.C., Mr. Pickford, K.C. and Mr. F. E. Smith.

At the hearing Mr. A. Booty, chartered accountant for Lever Brothers, gave the following figures for expenditure on Rivington, the total cost of the Rivington Hall estate and the adjoining properties was Road making cost was The estimated sum to complete the road making was and other charges and law costs were The Bungalow cost 10,996, the work at Lever park and to complete the work at the park would be required. All these items together totalled and Mr. Lever also claimed for water rights, and he offered to maintain the park during his lifetime.

Liverpool Corporation were very reluctant to pay the price the award announced and delayed settlement so long that there was an action in the Chancery Division of the High Court on Thursday, 6th April and Friday, 7th April, 1905, when Mr. W. H. Lever sought completion of the sale and payment thereof of lands in the Rivington watershed and also payment of costs. Liverpool Corporation contested the validity of the award. However judgement was for Mr. Lever and payment was enforced.

Work commenced in the new park during June 1902. Existing roads were improved and new roads were made, public amenities were provided, the Hall was renovated and a museum was commenced, pictures were hung in the Hall and historical articles and curios were placed on show. The two large Saxon barns were restored and fitted up for refreshment and catering and land and shelter was fitted out for the accommodation of a collection of animals in selected parts of the park. As soon as possible the park was opened to the public and on the 18th of May, 1904, with appropriate ceremony, Mr. W. T. Mason of Abergele, formerly Head of Bolton High School for Boys, declared Lever Park Rivington open for public use, in the presence of a large and representative gathering. The ceremony took place on the open space in front of the western porch of the Hall Barn and four trees were planted to mark the occasion.

Work continued on the park. A large number of trees were planted, a copy of the ruins of Liverpool Castle was erected on Cobloue, a small eminence on the eastern side of the Lower Rivington Reservoir. The small boating lake in front of Rivington Hall was divided into two by the making of a new road to the Hall from Great House. On the eastern half of the lake black swans from Western Australia were placed and white swans were placed on the western half. Enclosures and shelters were constructed for animals and birds in the form of an open air zoo nearly thirty years before Whipsnade was planned. Among the animals quartered in the park were : Fallow deer, Sambhur deer from India, and Zebus the white sacred cattle from the same place, Llamas from South America, Emus and Wallabies from Australia, Shetland ponies, Highland cattle, Mouflot sheep, Peacocks and cranes.

By the summer of 1911 the work on the Hall Barns and on the Park was near completion and a celebration in the form of an opening of Rivington Hall was organised for Tuesday, October 10th, 1911. A large and notable company was invited to the opening and afterwards to a luncheon in the Hall, whilst the workmen who had laboured on the buildings and in the park, together with the villagers, had their own luncheon, followed by a dance, in the Hall Barn. The invitations contained the following details:

Luncheon at Rivington Hall

Tuesday October 10th, 1911.

Menu

Soup

Boned Turkey a la Royal Boiled Chicken and Tongue Roast Chicken and Ham Roast Lamb Roast Beef
Veal and Ham Pie Salads Potatoes and French Beans Damson Tart Lemon Cream Coffee Cream
Madeira Jelly Fruit Salad Sardines in Aspic Coffee

TOASTS

His Majesty the King Proposed by Sir W. H. Lever Responded to by the Right Hon. The Lord Mayor of
Liverpool

Her Majesty the Queen Proposed by Sir W. H. Lever Responded to by the Mayor of Bolton

The Prince of Wales Proposed by Sir W. H. Lever Responded to by the Mayor of Birkenhead

The Royal Family Proposed by Sir W. H. Lever Responded to by the Mayor of Bootle

Success to Trade and Commerce of Liverpool, Bolton and District, Birkenhead, Bootle and Charley
Proposed by Sir W. H. Lever Responded to by the Mayor of Chorley

Lever Park Proposed by T. P. O'Connor, Esq., M.P. Responded to by A. H. Gill, Esq., M.P. and W. T.
Wilson, Esq., M.P.

The Architect and Planner Proposed by Geo. Harwood, Esq., M.P. Responded to by J. Simpson, Esq.,
and T. H. Mawson, Esq., Hon. A.R.I.B.A.

GOD SAVE THE KING

Mr. W. H. Lever's first Bungalow, named Roynton Cottage, was built of pitch-pine and glass with a tiled roof. It was large and roomy, very well furnished and contained a very good collection of pictures. A large lawn with wide flower borders was laid out in front and beautiful terraced gardens were made on the adjoining slopes. This residence was burned down to the ground by Suffragettes on July 8th, 1913, and its contents were a total loss. The Suffragettes had called at Great House Barn on their way, had afternoon tea there and then, posing as students, asked their way to the Bungalow and particulars of the building and its residents.

Without any loss of time the site was cleared and a new Bungalow was erected, and to prevent any repetition of loss by fire it was built of stone, glass and concrete at a cost of It was stated in 1920 that Lord Leverhuime, as he had now become, had spent upwards of on the bungalow, lodges, gardens and the/park and that he would continue to spend money on Rivington as long as he lived. On a Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1919 the Bungalow Gardens were thrown open to the public for the payment of a small fee and the proceeds were divided among the local institutions and

charities. This was a great success and was repeated for the next five years. Its popularity can be judged by the following report taken from a local newspaper : "PANORAMA OF BEAUTY GLORIES OF NATURE AND ART AT THE BUNGALOW A SUCCESSFUL FETE DAY . . . Art which conceals Art is the only term adequate to express the inner feelings of wonder which must have struck every visitor to the Bungalow gardens on Saturday. As the crowd wound up the long winding road from Scholes Bank and stopped to take breath and gaze around, they were impressed by the natural grandeur lying before them. Several well-known Horwich gentlemen took toll of the tickets at the lodge gates of the main entrance, and soon the grounds were full of happy people who had come from miles around and more were continually arriving. "As the guide advised people to see the sundial on the great lawn many made their way thither. To reach the sward, flight after flight of stone steps had to be climbed, but the inscription on the sundial face stated, "Live today, not regretting yesterday, nor fearing tomorrow". From the lawn, itself a fine achievement on this rocky hillside, people stood with eyes shaded earnestly regarding the coast to discern how many places were visible from this new viewpoint. Southport and the sea beyond, the Ribble and the Mersey could be plainly seen and the Welsh Hills were there, low on the southern horizon. But Blackpool was invisible owing to a haze which persisted all afternoon.

"A panorama of the surrounding countryside delighted the eye, whilst the Pike frowned on the Arcadia below and sent down cool breezes to temper the summer heat. The amateur photographer was, as usual, in his element and shutters were clicking at every corner, as family groups and flower-covered bushes were snapped.

A Gardeners Paradise

"The gardens themselves were ablaze with riotous colour, Rhododendrons of all shades from pink to blood-red to purple, marshalled their battalions of bloom wherever the visitor wandered and easily took first place for magnificence of colour, pink and yellow azaleas, and honeysuckle stood out boldly against a dark background of firs and heather, whilst many alpine plants and shrubs, unknown to English gardens flourished on the hill slopes.

Between the crevices of the steps grew other strange plants, a certain white petalled flower strayed in profusion in every vacant corner, and houseleek and stonecrop grew on every wall. "The cool recesses of the woods did not seem to attract the majority, though lovely woodland glimpses could be obtained from most paths. Little rills trickled through the dell bottoms and splashed over the stones or leaped from the waterfalls brink and leafy trees made play with light and shadows as they waved in the gentle breeze. "Red and white campions, Solomon's seal, Herb Robert, Bluebells, Foxgloves, and all the dear countryside flowers, beloved of rambling children, were everywhere. Some spots appeared to have come from the Isle of Man and dropped in Rivington, so much did they resemble the glens of Mona's Isle. "The older folk naturally looked for a cool and comfortable place and found their ideal in the shady nooks round the pagoda and in the little arbours dotted about the grounds. Those fitted with a couple of deck chairs, it was noticed, were almost entirely occupied by younger folks, who appeared almost entirely oblivious of their glorious surroundings.

Quaint courtyards, with creeper covered oaken rafters and mossy walls, stone paths with mosaic patterns, old fashioned pigeon lofts, terraces, balconies, and verandahs provided promenaders with delightful walks. Others reclined at ease in deck chairs or took al fresco meals on the lawns and slopes. "Gaily dressed women and girls displayed their summer dresses of such varied hues as to

rival the very flowers themselves for splendour. Kiddies frolicked round about and haunted the vicinity of the artificial lake, which has probably the finest setting in the grounds.

"The general impression given to visitors is that of a wonderful prodigality of bloom, which, allied to a quaint old-fashioned solidity in the paths and pergolas seemed irresistibly like one of ancient castle gardens remade. Many visitors had never dreamed of such a paradise existing within a mile of the Pike, and Lord Leverhulme was heartily thanked by many a town dweller for allowing the public such a unique visit to the wonderful gardens surrounding his Bungalow." Nearly 4,000 visitors attended on that occasion and the local charities benefited to the amount of 77-4-5d.

The first Viscount Leverhulme died on May 7th, 1925, at his residence in Hampstead, London, and shortly afterwards his Rivington property came up for sale. It was bought by Mr. John Magee of Bolton, and on his death Liverpool Corporation purchased it. To the surprise of the general public, in May 1947, the Corporation announced its intention of demolishing the buildings. A conference of local authorities, nine were represented, including Bolton, Horwich, Blackrod and Westhoughton, was then called to discuss the possibilities of saving the buildings and preserving the gardens. Many meetings were held and various schemes were examined. The most popular one was to convert the establishment into a convalescent home, but agreement was never reached and finally the attempt was abandoned. One by one the buildings were demolished and now the walls and fences are laid low, the gardens have been despoiled and robbed, so that now it is difficult to recall how beautiful and pleasant this portion of Rivington was forty years ago.

Extract from About Rivington, Rawlinson 1969 created 1997 by Paul Lacey